

Message Text

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PAGE 01 CARACA 01012 281857Z

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
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R 281528Z JAN 76
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1731
INFO AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 1012

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PFOR PBOR CO VE
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA BORDER DISPUTE

REF: STATE 017359

1. DURING OUR CONVERSATION ON JANUARY 22 PRESIDENT PEREZ DESCRIBED THE PUTATIVE SETTLEMENT OF THE BORDER ISSUE WITH COLOMBIA ALONG THE LINES OF BURELLI'S EXPLANATION (REFTEL). I ASKED IF JOINT DEVELOPMENT OF RESOURCES IN THE GULF MEANT THAT LOPEZ MICHELSEN'S IDEA OF A "CONDOMINIUM" HAD BEEN ACCEPTED. PEREZ SAID NO. IN HIS VERSION SEPARATE MIXED ENTERPRISES WOULD BE ESTABLISHED FOR WORK IN COLOMBIAN AND VENEZUELAN WATERS RESPECTIVELY. I GATHERED THAT THE GOC WOULD HAVE THE MAJORITY PARTICIPATION IN THE FIRST AND THE GOV THE MAJORITY IN THE SECOND.

2. PEREZ WAS NOT ASSURED AS BURELLI WITH RESPECT TO DOMESTIC BACKING FOR THIS FORMULA. HE SAID HE MUST HAVE A "NATIONAL CONSENSUS" IN FAVOR OF IT BEFORE MOVING AHEAD TO A FORMAL AGREEMENT WITH COLOMBIA--AND THAT CONSENSUS MEANS COPEI SUPPORT. THE PRESIDENT SAID HE WAS WORKING TO OBTAIN SUCH SUPPORT BUT GAVE NO INDICATION THAT HIS EFFORTS HAD ALREADY BEEN SUCCESSFUL. AS HE PRESENTED IT TO ME, HIS ARGUMENT IS THAT THE PROPOSED AGREEMENT GIVES VENEZUELA CLOSE TO ITS MAXIMUM ON THE CRITICAL BOUNDARY ISSUES AT THE MINIMAL COST OF COLOMBIA'S SHARING IN THE POSSIBLE FUTURE BENEFITS OF PETROLEUM DEVELOPMENT IN THE GULF. IN HIS OPINION VENEZUELA CAN AFFORD TO BE GENEROUS IN THE LATTER
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RESPECT SINCE ITS REAL INTERESTS WOULD BE FURTHERED IN ANY CASE

BY A STRENGTHENING OF THE PRECARIOUS ECONOMY OF ITS NEIGHBOR. PEREZ ADDED THAT FAILURE TO REACH AGREEMENT THIS YEAR (HAVING IN MIND COLOMBIA'S ELECTORAL TIMETABLE) WOULD REVIVE DEMANDS FROM THE OTHER SIDE FOR SUBMISSION OF THE CASE TO THE WORLD COURT. THE PRESIDENT WAS CERTAIN THAT VENEZUELA COULD NOT POSSIBLY DO AS WELL IN THAT VENUE AS WITH THE CURRENT PROPOSAL.

3. COMMENT: WE THINK BURELLI MAY BE AT LEAST PREMATURE. COPEI HAS SAID LITTLE PUBLICLY ABOUT THE ISSUE OF LATE AND PRESUMABLY IS CONSIDERING THE PROPOSED FORMULA. BUT WE WOULD EXPECT CONSIDERABLE INTERNAL DEBATE AMONG COPEI'S CONTENDING FACTIONS BEFORE A FIRM PARTY DECISION COULD BE REACHED AND HAVE YET TO SEE SIGNS THAT SUCH A DEBATE IS UNDER WAY. (WE ALSO NOTE PRESS SPECULATION FROM BOGOTA THAT THE GOC MIGHT TRY TO TAKE A CLAIM TO THE LOS MONJES ISLANDS TO THE ICJ. THAT, OF COURSE, WOULD RETURN THE PROBLEM TO SQUARE ONE.)

4. THE PRIVATE COMMENTS WE GET FROM COPEYANOS GENERALLY FOCUS ON THE ALLEGED INTRANSIGENCE OF THE MILITARY. THE COMMON WISDOM HERE IS THAT THEY WILL ACCEPT NOTHING SHORT OF VENEZUELA'S MAXIMUM DEMANDS, WITH NO COMPROMISES OR TRADEOFFS TO BE CONTEMPLATED. IT IS TRUE THAT SOME RETIRED OFFICERS (E.G., GENERAL GARCIA VILLASMIL) AND OTHERS PURPORTING TO REPRESENT THE MILITARY POINT OF VIEW TAKE A VERY HARD LINE INDEED. BUT WE ARE NOT SO CERTAIN ABOUT THE ACTIVE OFFICERS. THEY MIGHT FIND IT UNCOMFORTABLE TO BE LINED UP ALONE WITH A HANDFUL OF FIREBRANDS AND THE RABBLE-ROUSING CAPRILES NEWSPAERS IF COPEI WERE TO AGREE TO SUPPORT A REASONABLE AGREEMENT. IN ANY EVENT, THE PRESIDENT CAN BE EXPECTED TO PERSIST. HIS THEME DURING MUCH OF OUR TALK LAST THURSDAY WAS 1976 AS THE YEAR OF OPPORTUNITY FOR LATIN AMERICA--THE YEAR IN WHICH THE REGION SHOWS THE WAY TO THE WORLD BY SETTling PEACEABLY THE ANCIENT ISSUES OF BOLIVIA'S ACCESS TO THE SEA, AT THE PANAMA CANAL AND THE VENEZUELAN-COLOMBIAN BOUNDARY DISPUTE. HE WAS OBVIOUSLY FIRED BY THIS VISION.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: DISPUTE SETTLEMENT, BOUNDARY CLAIMS, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 28 JAN 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: coburnhl
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976CARACA01012
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X1
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760033-0641
From: CARACAS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760115/aaaaamkj.tel
Line Count: 98
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 76 STATE 17359
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: coburnhl
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 19 JUL 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <19 JUL 2004 by izenbei0>; APPROVED <26 OCT 2004 by coburnhl>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA BORDER DISPUTE
TAGS: PFOR, PBOR, CO, VE
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006